

The ones who walk away  
from Omelas.

URSULA LE GUIN

**King'sMUN 2023**

**The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas  
Literary Crisis Delegate Guide**

**By: Lexie Pattinson**

Dear King'sMUN 2023 delegates,

I am truly honoured as this year's Secretary General of King'sMUN to welcome you to our 9th annual conference and our first in-person conference since the COVID-19 pandemic. The secretariat has been working hard throughout this school year to deliver you an incredible conference with a variety of creative committees, experienced chairs, and an overall successful day of debate.

MUN is a reenactment of United Nations conferences at the high school and university level, where representatives from all over come together to discuss the most pressing issues that plague our world today. Students take on the positions of various countries, characters, or political figures in order to create resolutions for both real and fictional issues and crises.

Throughout my time participating in Model United Nations, I have developed many valuable skills that I will take with me throughout my life. It has improved my confidence when public speaking as well as my ability to problem solve. Furthermore, MUN is valuable to me as it promotes lifelong connections with new people as you meet many other delegates who share your passions while in committee sessions. I truly believe that skills that you will learn through your participation in MUN will help you throughout your high school journey, in everyday life, and beyond.

Contrary to popular belief, MUN is truly for everyone. At King'sMUN, we provide a variety of committees to ensure that we have something that everyone will enjoy debating about. From the world's most pressing issues discussed in UNSC and UN Women to Indigenous affairs and from the gods on Mount Olympus to the prohibition in the 1920s, we strive to ensure that we can appeal to the passions of a variety of delegates. Everyone is welcome at King'sMUN, whether you have no experience or have been to a multitude of conferences, there is a place for you here.

Once again, I am thrilled to welcome all delegates, new or returning, back in person to King'sMUN. I, as well as the rest of the secretariat, are looking very forward to seeing you on Saturday, February 25. Whether this is your first conference or your last, I hope you are able to engage in fruitful debate and have an amazing time at King'sMUN 2023.

Sincerely,

Athena Ponte  
Secretary General  
King'sMUN 2023

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**Synopsis:**

Can you justify the happiness of a village in exchange for the extreme suffering of one child? In Ursula K. Le Guin confronts a moral dilemma in her story of, *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*. The story presents a philosophical thought experiment: should the intense suffering of a singular child become acceptable as the rest of the village remains in a utopia?

Omelas continues to be an ideal town. There is no need for a city hall as it is crime free, the kids are healthy, the crops are flourishing, the businesses are thriving, and positivity is always being spread. Although, down below in one of the basements of a shiny building, lives the child that the village depends on for prosperity. They appear to be about six years old, although that physically demonstrates his weakness and malnutrition as they actually are ten. “The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child” (Le Guin 4).

The dependence of the child living in the cage has been indoctrinated into the young child's mind between the ages of eight and twelve. Parents, teachers, and adults emphasize the importance of this child's misery in order to maintain the peace of the rest of the village. Some people go to visit the child, although for most, it is just enough to know that they sit where they do. Even those who go to visit him experience little to no shame as guilt does not exist in Omelas. The only emotion to be experienced by locals is joy. Should they choose to go visit the starving child, they may experience forms of verbal, or physical abuse to sustain his misery. No matter how much he weeps, cries, or screams, they mustn't be let out.

Ultimately, knowing the state of the child leads everyone in the town with a choice. Should they continue to live as if no wrong doing is being committed, or should they stand up for equality and by doing so permanently leave Omelas. The decision has split people into two opposing sides labeling them by their ethical standpoint driving an even bigger disagreement.

The author challenges the reader to consider the concept of utilitarianism in order to challenge one's morals and cognitive dissonance. This idea of persuasion has also been used to justify the citizens of Omelas' actions, knowing they are doing the majority of the town a service by letting the child suffer. Utilitarianism presents that keeping the child in abominable misery is the only morally acceptable action in this case as it benefits the majority.

### **Background of the Committee:**

A council of people has been called to assess the current living situation of Omelas. This council is formed by locals, legal professionals, former citizens, and anyone else who has knowledge of this child's existence. The role of this group is to come to some kind of conclusion about what should be done with the child. Should he continue to sacrifice his well-being in order for the rest of the locals to live well and prosper, or should he be set free while everyone else now must suffer.

### **Why is the Issue at Hand Important to Address?**

The physical, mental, and emotional needs of this child are now in the hands of this council. But so is the utopian nature of the community. The proposed issue becomes more than just a civil issue, it becomes a global and moral crisis as well. This child's state becomes a guiding footstep for how if not dealt with properly, the choosing of selfism over selflessness could negatively impact the progression of society. If not adhered to, the morals of the town could create and evolve to more communities willing to sacrifice innocent beings. People find a peace of mind and a comfort of doing such an act when they remain ignorant to the problem and never become face to face with the solution, it encourages torturous abuse.

### **Themes and Concepts:**

#### Scapegoat:

By not identifying the gender of the child, the author utilizes the character metaphorically as the village's scapegoat. While every other local is able to live well and freely, they pour all their burdens and sins onto this child.

#### Man vs. Society:

The social contract that underpins the ideal city of Omelas requires that each citizen acknowledge that the prosperity of their community depends on the suffering of one child. Those who are unable to accept the agony of the youngster depart the city on foot by themselves, their whereabouts unknown. The anecdote thus raises a well-known utilitarian dilemma: Is it morally acceptable to cause pain to one person in order to ensure the enjoyment of others?

### Growing up and integrating into society:

Every kid in the city of Omelas must discover, between the ages of eight and twelve, that the happiness of their city depends on the agony of the one abused and neglected child as part of the rite of coming of age. The children of the town have the option of either accepting this child's misery and carrying on with their happy life or choosing to leave the city on their own and never return.

### Happiness and Suffering:

According to "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," happiness is impossible without suffering. LeGuin believes that even in her idealized city of unbounded joy, one child must endure severe abuse and suffering in order for the other residents to be happy. The basic tenet of existence in Omelas is that the child must endure continuous suffering in order for society to be happy. In other words, suffering is the cost of happiness, and the two are mutually exclusive. Because of this, the story implies that happiness requires a deep awareness of pain in addition to the idea that joy and suffering are eternally intertwined.

### **Possible Crisis Ideas:**

1. Possible crisis could revolve around the child's well-being. Should the village risk helping him to provide some form of relief and possibly destroy their perfect town? Or should they choose to let it suffer
2. Is Omelas a unique village? Or could there possibly be more like it? Is the Child the only scapegoat or is there more like them?
3. What would happen if an outsider learned about the Child's existence? Would they also have knowledge of how vital the Child is to the prosperity of the town? Could they be empowered to do something about the kids' living situation?

### Possible Delegate Positions:

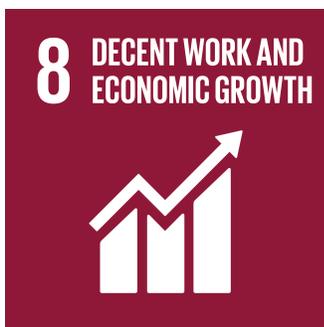
1. Key leaders from different religions
2. Citizens of Omelas: for and against the captivity of the Child
3. Advocate for the Child
4. Outsiders traveling by Omelas
5. The Child's parents
6. United Nations Representative
7. Environmentalists

### Sustainable Development Goals:



Target 2.2.1- “Prevalence of stunting (height for age  $<-2$  standard deviation from the median of the World Health Organization (WHO) Child Growth Standards) among children under 5 years of age” ([www.sdgs.un.org](http://www.sdgs.un.org)).

- While they live in the cage, the child has been stunted due to the lack of nutritious food that is being given. The child is ten years old although, due to the lack of food they are being fed they have been stunted and physically appear to be only six.



Target 8.2- “Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors” ([www.sdgs.un.org](http://www.sdgs.un.org)).

- While the village is prosperous, they are quite aware of new technological advances. The town has trains, electricity, and central heating, however they choose not to improve their own society with more modern advancement.



Target 10.2- “By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status” ([www.sdgs.un.org](http://www.sdgs.un.org)).

- While the village continues to prosper due to the suffering of the child, they disinclude one local from this idea. While everyone continues to prosper, promotion for equality for all ages, including the town’s ten year old kid.



Target 16.2.1- “Proportion of children aged 1–17 years who experienced any physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers in the past month” ([www.sdgs.un.org](http://www.sdgs.un.org)).

- While the child lives in captivity, it must continue to experience the harsh psychological and physical abuse from the village in order to maintain abominable misery.

“The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas”

By Ursula K LeGuin - from *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The ringing of the boats in harbor sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved.

Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and gray, grave master workmen, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance. Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows' crossing flights over the music and the singing. All the processions wound towards the north side of the city, where on the great water-meadow called the Green Fields boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mud-stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race. The horses wore no gear at all but a halter without bit. Their manes were braided with streamers of silver, gold, and green. They flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another; they were vastly excited, the horse being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own. Far off to the north and west the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay. The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky. There was just enough wind to make the banners that marked the racecourse snap and flutter now and then. In the silence of the broad green meadows one could hear the music winding throughout the city streets, farther and nearer and ever approaching, a cheerful faint sweetness of the air from time to time trembled and gathered together and broke out into the great joyous clanging of the bells.

Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How to describe the citizens of Omelas?

They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. But we do not say the words of cheer much any more. All smiles have become archaic. Given a description such as this one

tends to make certain assumptions. Given a description such as this one tends to look next for the King, mounted on a splendid stallion and surrounded by his noble knights, or perhaps in a golden litter borne by great-muscled slaves. But there was no king. They did not use swords, or keep slaves. They were not barbarians, I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. There were not less complex than us.

The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. If it hurts, repeat it. But to praise despair is to condemn delight, to embrace violence is to lose hold of everything else. We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe happy man, nor make any celebration of joy. How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naive and happy children--though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched. O miracle! But I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you. Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle category, however--that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury, exuberance, etc.-- they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it. I incline to think that people from towns up and down the coast have been coming to Omelas during the last days before the Festival on very fast little trains and double-decked trams, and that the train station of Omelas is actually the handsomest building in town, though plainer than the magnificent Farmers' Market. But even

granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man or woman, lover or stranger, who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood, although that was my first idea. But really it would be better not to have any temples in Omelas--at least, not manned temples. Religion yes, clergy no. Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about, offering themselves like divine souffles to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh. Let them join the processions. Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the gory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and (a not unimportant point) let the offspring of these delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt. But what else should there be? I thought at first there were no drugs, but that is puritanical. For those who like it, the faint insistent sweetness of drooz may perfume the ways of the city, drooz which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor, and wonderful visions at last of the very arcane and inmost secrets of the Universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond all belief; and it is not habit-forming. For more modest tastes I think there ought to be beer. What else, what else belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely, the celebration of courage. But as we did without clergy, let us do without soldiers. The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right kind of joy; it will not do; it is fearful and it is trivial. A boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer: This is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life. I don't think many of them need to take drooz.

Most of the processions have reached the Green Fields by now. A marvelous smell of cooking goes forth from the red and blue tents of the provisioners. The faces of small children are amiably sticky; in the benign gray beard of a man a couple of crumbs of rich pastry are entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the starting line of the course. An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket, and tall young men wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd alone, playing on a wooden flute.

People pause to listen, and they smile, but they do not speak to him, for he never ceases playing and never sees them, his dark eyes wholly rapt in the sweet, thing magic of the tune.

He finishes, and slowly lowers his hands holding the wooden flute.

As if that little private silence were the signal, all at once a trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing. The horses rear on their slender legs, and some of them neigh in answer. Sober-faced, the young riders stroke the horses' necks and soothe them, whispering. "Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope..." They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is.

The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room, a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes--the child has no understanding of time or

interval--sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked; the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good, " it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

This is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of understanding; and most of those who come to see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back, to see the child. No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed.

The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no real doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there sniveling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer. Now do you believe them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible.

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or a woman much older falls silent for a day or two, then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman.

Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards

the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

**Further questions:**

1. What would happen to the Child if they died?
2. Why do people decide to leave Omelas rather than try to save the Child?
3. Is this the only society, real or fiction, that runs off of a utilitarianism ideology?
4. Has the scapegoat always been the same Child? Or is the kid replaced after years?
5. Is ignorance bliss? Would the people in the village be better off not knowing of the child's existence?
6. Would the village's utilitarianism ideology be changed if everyone at some point in their life had to go visit this child?
7. Is happiness conditional?
8. Are the people in Omelas actually happy?
9. Is Omelas actually a utopian society? Or is it a dystopian one in disguise?

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